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Brian E. Butler

Studying (the Theoretical Analysis of) Contemporary American Film: On
Elsaesser and Buckland's *Studying Contemporary American Film* Thomas
Elsaesser and Warren Buckland *Studying Contemporary American Film: A
Guide to Movie Analysis* Arnold: London 2002 ISBN 0 340 76206 3 (PB) x + 309
pp.

It is obvious that academic film studies is a strange bastion of broad theoretical
eclecticism. In *Studying Contemporary American Film*, Thomas Elsaesser and
Warren Buckland set out to organize, clarify, and make applicable various veins
of analysis within this area in relationship to a specific cultural product -- the
American film.

In each chapter a specific film such as *Die Hard*, *Chinatown*, or *The
Silence of the Lambs* is analyzed through two theoretical stances and, maybe
most significantly, a group of principles are synthesized which the reader is
encouraged to use in analyzing further films. While they try to systematically
introduce the reader to various types of theory and analysis, the authors profess
a reasoned agnosticism towards which method is correct, characterizing the
adoption of one method over another as more likely resulting in a 'trained
incapacity' rather than the elimination of confusion or false results. In their
conclusion this is put in the following way:

'Our sense is that in the contest between film as text and film as experience, or
film as discourse and film as event, one may want to take sides but need not be
forced to choose. Rather, one should welcome the plurality, providing it keeps the
film analyst reflexive about the respective theoretical assumptions and students
are equipped with the relevant methodological skills to continue to conduct valid
film analyses.' (288)

The structure of the book reflects this attitude in many ways. For instance, in
Chapter 5, Barthes's theoretical work on textual coding in *S/Z* [1] is combined
and contrasted with a section on the logic of the video game, and both are then
used to analyze and interpret *The Fifth Element*. From Barthes the authors
synthesize a method that attempts to acknowledge the multiple codes and plural
meanings that can be read off the surface of a film.

Following Barthes's lead, the film viewer is encouraged to cut a film into
segments and then look for five different types of code, such as the symbolic
code, which postulates that 'each culture or civilization organizes experience
according to a multitude of basic, general, abstract categories' (154).

At its most general level the application of this analysis in the chapter reveals that
The Fifth Element runs on the abstract categories of evil, hero, etc. On the
other hand, when applying a video game logic analysis to *The Fifth Element*, a
logic that ensures reliable rules and repetition combined with escalating levels of
adventure and immediate rewards and punishments (162-163), the authors find

that the film is, strangely enough, 'literally organized according to video game logic' (164).

This analysis helps to explain the somewhat baffling fact that for most of the film the rules and the aim are clear and the only question remaining for the viewer is whether or not the rules will be mastered and the aim satisfied. More specifically, within the film's structure, as in many video games: '

The only relevant question posed . . . is not whether a particular situation calls for negotiation or violence but how efficiently can violence be administered.' (164, quoting Gottschalk 1995) [2] 46

From the brief analysis offered one might expect the authors to find that the influence of video on film is unfortunate. And this is somewhat correct. The authors do celebrate the ability of video games and other digital media to include the participant in the text. For instance, video games are interactive and therefore the text is at least partially constructed by the 'reader'. But they also admit that there seems to be no real analogue here between playing a video game and viewing a film. That is, even if the video game is largely determined by the rules programmed into the computer there is at least some activity of construction on the part of the player -- the question raised is therefore what type of activity, if any, is required of the film viewer and why might it be thought similar? Noticeably absent from the chapter's discussion is the question of which method of analysis or interpretation is more useful or correct.

At least as something of an afterthought critique of the correctness or usefulness of specific theories is, indeed, offered in other places. Chapter 6, titled 'Cognitive Theories of Narration', uses the theories of David Bordwell and Edward Branigan to analyze Lynch's *Lost Highway* and, in the process, to highlight some limits to psychoanalytic theories of film, as well as to offer a picture of just what activities the viewer must actually engage in. [3]

This is important because psychoanalytic theories often appear to so dominate the realm of film studies that their assumptions often go completely unquestioned. Further, they offer a picture of film viewership and pleasure that is largely passive in nature (at least in relationship to the choices of the specific individual).

Bordwell's theory on the other hand, as a cognitivist theory, rests upon an analysis of narration and the process of meaning construction that takes place through the viewer's active generation of inferences and hypotheses (it is an interesting question, in light of this analysis, as to why the commonplace that reading is active and viewing is passive is not more clearly scrutinized). For Bordwell, using vocabulary he inherits from the Russian formalists, a 'fabula' is constructed from the events offered in the film. This 'fabula' is contrasted with the 'syuzet' which is the patterning of the story as actually offered in the arrangement of the film.

What is tricky about *The Lost Highway*, according to this manner of analysis, is that the film creates an irremediable gap between the hypotheses that the film encourages the viewer to generate and the ability to adopt any one resolution from the various possibilities. Even such basic assumptions such as that of character stability are thwarted in Lynch's film. For instance, sometimes

characters are in two places at once, and others seem to transform into completely different people (185).

Branigan, on the other hand, uses a cognitive theory of narration to develop a theory of focalization, or character experience within film, as well as the identification of eight levels of narration (188). Both theorists postulate a viewer that is an active participant in the construction of meaning during the viewing of a film. The inclusion of cognitive theories is intriguing because it implicates broader philosophical investigations in epistemology and cognitive theory that could greatly inform film theory. It is an important and troubling question as to why other film theory introductions, surveys, anthologies, etc. -- such as *The Film Studies Reader* and *The Oxford Guide to Film Studies* -- are largely blind to such a relevant and rigorously developed tradition of thought on such issues. [4]

To their credit Elsaesser and Buckland not only acknowledge this area of thought, but also include another important area of philosophical analysis, modal logic, in a chapter that centers on an analysis of Spielberg's films *Jurassic Park* and *The Lost World*. While the investigation of modal logic is brief due to the survey nature of the book and the overly broad and eclectic nature of the discipline, it at least raises the question as to how a film which portrays non-existent worlds can read as 'realistic' and offers the outline of a plausible answer.

Once again, while the explicit stance of the book is that of an inclusive pluralism, the actual structure of the chapter contains a criticism and elaboration of a very influential theory within film theory.

The chapter that includes the analysis of modal logic begins, importantly, with an outline of Andre Bazin's theory of realism and the long take. As a study of realism in film, Bazin's theory is, of course, ubiquitous. Whether accepted or subjected to harsh critique it remains one of the true organizing points of film theory as an academic institution. While too well known to require extensive explication, it is enough to state that Bazin believes that the combination of deep focus and the long take create three aspects of cinematic realism: 1, ontological realism, due to the mechanical and recorded nature of the filmic image; 2, dramatic realism, because several planes of action are reflected on the screen at once; and 3, psychological realism, by not predetermining the spectator's perception of the scene (199).

Of course, the problem with this theory in relationship to *Jurassic Park* and *The Lost World* is that such 'reality reproducing' devices are used in service of scenes that don't exist and never did exist in physical actuality. The films not only reproduce scenes that were never really physically existent outside of the image, but they do so in very convincing manner by imitating all the mechanical and indexical aspects of the more traditional photographic filmic image.

Through reference to David Lewis and Nicholas Rescher (and a welcome avoidance of the overvalued or at least overexposed work of Jean Baudrillard) Elsaesser and Buckland claim that the idea of 'possible worlds' can help explain the realism of computer generated film images (211). [5] This leads them to an analysis of devices such as computer generated camera blur which were designed in order to capture the cinematic analogue of mechanical realism. The brief use of such concepts highlights the various tools that the academic philosophy tradition has to offer those interested in a rigorous study of the epistemological and ontological aspects of film.

On the other hand, there is no doubt that the realm of accepted theories in film studies is already so crowded and broad as to be almost unmanageable. The area is wildly eclectic and therefore a manageable guide to the domain will necessarily be somewhat programmatic, and possibly overly brief and simplistic. Even in the case of Elsaesser and Buckland's book, with its express limitation to contemporary American film, the list of theoretical stances is staggering. Included are outlines of classical and post-classical conceptions of narrative, mise-en-scene criticism, statistical style analysis, thematic criticism, deconstructive criticism, structuralism, Barthes's concept of the readerly text, video game logic, modal logic, various cognitive theories, Bazin's realism, various psychoanalytic theories (both oedipal and post-oedipal), feminist theory, and Foucaultian as well as Deleuzian analyses.

This is a blooming and buzzing confusion which makes understanding even the most simplistic aspects of each theory difficult for even the most broad intellectual. And it is hard to imagine philosophical non-specialists understanding Lewis's reasons for arguing that logically possible worlds are ontologically real, even if they could devote undivided attention to its rigorous development. Such unavoidable (as well as avoidable) limits of time, space, and expertise are sometimes reflected in the fact that a few of outlined theories in *_Studying Contemporary American Film_* read cryptically (of course this might often be seen rather as a fault of the theories themselves).

So there is naturally a question as to which intellectual tools should be adopted, and the answer will often come down to which theories are easier to assimilate. This might be thought to explain, at least in part, why simpler, often more dogmatic and yet more questionable theories carry so much weight within film studies circles. Of course all this argues for a more critical return to the idea that a happy pluralism of theories is really such a clearly unobjectionable solution.

Strangely enough -- despite the discipline's and the book's spirit of a happy pluralistic agnosticism as to which theory/method is more correct, useful, etc. -- in film theory there is one line of thought specifically developed in reference to American film that appears to be amazingly consistent and held across many of the otherwise divergent theories. As put in *_Studying Contemporary American Film_*, there is a 'broad underlying assumption' of many, if not all, theories and methods of film analysis, and this has been an agreement that 'the purpose of Hollywood story-telling is to disguise the ideological contradictions of contemporary capitalist society and to enforce patriarchal values in the form of normative heterosexuality' (35).

This agreement is founded on the recognition, 'that the Hollywood cinema's 'impression of reality', is actually not so much a matter of how real that is which is being filmed . . . but how formally elaborated and how culturally ingrained the codes, norms, or conventions are that govern cinematic representation' (36).

Explicit here is a claim that the realistic quality of Hollywood cinema (identified by traits such as character-centered causality, systematic resolution of symmetries and dissymmetries, continuity editing, and hierarchical narration) is grounded in (and, when working, propagates) an invisible hegemonic Western ideology. The main insight here, when disassociated from the tired and unsatisfactorily nuanced anti-Western, anti-capitalism, and anti-bourgeois stance, is that codes

of representation can become invisible to the point of passing for reality if they are thoroughly internalized.

And even though such a criticism might not apply as neatly to Hollywood cinema as critics would like (indeed it seems that Hollywood cinema is not nearly so neat and tidy or as attached to an invisible realism as often claimed) this insight is important. It is a real advance to realize that what feels 'real' might not, in all actuality, be very real after all. (Even so, it is maybe more important, given the current almost universal acceptance of this insight, to ask if it is really correct to view all feelings of reality as if they are just internalized *co des*.)

But sadly the shrill anti-Westernism that much film studies carries seemingly as a requirement is almost never distinguished from the important idea that representational systems can appear neutral while actually ignoring important aspects of a given situation and carrying thick normative content. Failure to clearly make this distinction seems to have become an endemic example of trained incapacity. It sometimes appears that film studies just blindly accepts such a 'hermeneutics of suspicion' and is because of this just acting as a sub-genre of cultural studies where the main issues are not film, cinema, art, but actually class or race or gender, and the 'Western' tendency to 'Other'.

Even Elsaesser and Buckland, normally much more even-handed and more intellectually critical of this stance than the average film theorist, fall into this trap when they jump from the claim that video logic entails certain standard patterns to the further claim that such patterns therefore perpetuate 'Western ideological myths' (164). I'm just not so sure that this assimilation of the logic of video games to a peculiarly Western ideology is so easy and clearly warranted. Furthermore, isn't it about time we accept that many undesirable traits found within Western culture (as well as desirable ones) are not specifically or uniquely Western at all? Why, more broadly, is it critically invisible and intellectually acceptable to essentialize Western culture, when essentializing the non-Western 'Other' is immediately suspicious (indeed often thought to be a uniquely Western fault)?

Once again, viewing representative samples of books designed to introduce readers to film studies seems to show that they could be thought to have erred, not only on the side of a dogmatic anti-Westernism, but have almost inevitably combined this with an anti-essentialism that is equally unquestioned. Yes, it may be that any essentialist statement should be viewed with suspicion. Certainly it is the case that essentialist stances have often been attached to injustices and prejudice. On the other hand many 'essentialist' theories have been effectively used to combat just such injustices and prejudices. Yet it often turns out that the liberatory qualities that anti-essentialist stances seem to carry often convert, when put into practice, into reactionary and/or conservative stances. At the very least it should be obvious that anti-essentialist stances are not intrinsically neutral, just, and non-prejudicial, and therefore such stances should also be subject to scrutiny.

So, the seemingly innocuous move adopted by Elsaesser and Buckland to offer the various theories or methods as various tools to adopt or reject without deeper repercussions, may not be so innocent as appears. It may even be the case that such intellectual pluralism, if adopted uncritically, can lead to its own type of trained incapacity. Furthermore, it seems to be an accepted assumption within film theory that invisibility of narrative structure or normative content is inherently undesirable. But this is not so obviously true.

Philosophical stances from such diverse sources as Wittgenstein or pragmatism (which the authors explicitly adopt as their philosophical stance) have a less dogmatic view relating to the value of transparency. While the Cartesian hope for full transparency and/or intelligibility has been critiqued mercilessly in contemporary theory, it still seems to be an unconscious motivating force in many of the most influential theories within the realm of film studies. Indeed, one of the strangest aspects of film studies as an academic domain seems to be its schizophrenic combination of a deep suspicion of the naturalness and clarity of the Hollywood film with a strong (if unacknowledged) commitment to a complete and transparent theoretical analysis of film and cinema where everything is put right and seen with perfect clarity.

Put in another way, the representative examples of criticism in the domain of film analysis largely replicate the features that the very same critics find so undesirable in a film. For instance, Hollywood films are critiqued because their realism is claimed to be a style in service of normative heterosexuality and patriarchy, and not just a neutral description. In other words, it is argued that the apparent clarity really implicates the passive viewer in a hierarchy of values without engaging the viewer's critical abilities. But much the same criticism could be aimed at the standard film studies article. In such articles there is almost never an admission that the logic is that of a narrator, that the critical text is not completely intelligible in itself, and that the manner of writing aims at an authority that should be passively assimilated without question by the reader.

But isn't this same type of passivity shown by the unwillingness to critique the foundations of the theoretical tools used within film studies? The theories are to be applied, not critiqued. Further, the values held by the critic are, though the actual animating force, almost always hidden behind the aggressive critique of the opposing values identified in the chosen film or genre. Here, the important implications of the format adopted by Elsaesser and Buckland are foregrounded. Each chapter not only lays out two theories or methods of analysis, and uses the tools offered in them to analyze a specific film, but the theories are followed by a set of suggestions as to how the reader can form them into a method in order to do further analyses.

In other words, the analytic text, *Studying Contemporary American Film*, encourages a wresting away of authority from the authors to the reader. Further, it explicitly encourages the reader to become a participant in film analysis and not just the passive recipient of completed projects. If this critique is correct, what seems at first like an innocuous claim in the preface where students are described as often put off by film theory because they are usually just presented with the 'results' of thinking (viii), becomes, to the contrary, a very significant point. In fact, it is very informative to read Elsaesser and Buckland's book as not only offering the reader a set of tools with which to analyze American Film, but also as offering a substantial critique of the manner, tone, and authoritative attitude often adopted within the realm of contemporary film theory and criticism.

This is not to state that the format adopted by Elsaesser and Buckland is really all that rare -- indeed it represents pretty much a standard format for a 'how to' book. But that such a standard format seems so transgressive and refreshing in the realm of film theory might highlight just how dogmatic and authoritative in manner much of what passes for liberating theory and deconstructive analysis really is. And that, needless to say, makes one very suspicious of how natural in

appearance, how 'real' or realistic the standard intellectual analysis actually is in contemporary film studies. It is a real addition to film theory to include the activity of the reader in the analysis of film.

But hopefully the intellectual questioning of the discipline will now look at the accepted theories with the analytical rigor that the philosophical tradition has to offer. Let me be clear that this is not an argument against expecting or appreciating clarity in analysis, maybe a better aim is to argue against the idea that clarity in argument, as in film, is nothing but acceptance of the hegemonic code of the moment and that therefore a cacophony of often incommensurable voices is the proper and obvious solution. If there is to be a reasoned agnosticism towards theory and method lets just try to ensure that it is reasoned and not just passively adopted because it is the accepted stance of the moment.

What becomes clear when philosophically analyzing the area of academic film studies is that broad theoretical eclecticism has costs. The question is whether such costs reflect the best investment if one really wants to effectively study film, American or otherwise.

University of North Carolina, Asheville, USA

Notes

1. Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977).
2. Simon Gottschalk, 'Videology: Video-Games as Postmodern Sites/Sights of Ideological Reproduction', *Symbolic Interaction*, vol. 18 no.1, 1995, p. 7 2E
3. See, for instance, David Bordwell, *Making Meaning: Inference and Rhetoric in the Interpretation of Cinema* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press 1989), and Edward Branigan, *Narrative Comprehension and Film* (New York: Routledge 1992).
4. See for example, Joanne Hollows, et al., *The Film Studies Reader* (London: Arnold 2000), and John Hill and Pamela Church Gibson, *The Oxford Guide to Film Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1998).
5. See for instance, Michael J. Loux, ed., *The Possible and the Actual: Readings in the Metaphysics of Modality* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press 1979) for discussions by both of these authors.

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